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Ireland and the Imperial Conference

IS THERE A WAY TO A SETTLEMENT?

BY

F. S. OLIVER

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

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IRELAND AND THE IMPERIAL CONFERENCE

IS THERE A WAY TO SETTLEMENT?

1. *Evidence of Mismanagement*

At the census of 1821 the Irish population was very nearly half that of Great Britain. At the census of 1911 it amounted to little more than one-tenth. During these ninety years of peace and prosperity the people of England, Scotland and Wales all but trebled their numbers, while those of Ireland shrank by more than a third.

The City of Belfast, indeed, shows a remarkable contrast with its surroundings. At the beginning of the same period it contained less than fifty thousand inhabitants; by the end, there was an eight-fold increase. But leaving Belfast out of the comparison, neither the whole Province of Ulster, nor even what are known as "the six counties"¹ showed results at all different from the rest of the country. This shrinkage of more than a third in the Irish

¹ That is, those which it has been proposed to exclude from the Home Rule Act: Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone.

population is not peculiar to any special localities ; it is a general characteristic of the whole island.

In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the obvious inference is the right one. It seems safe, therefore, to conclude that during the past century Ireland has been a badly-managed concern. This conclusion is peculiarly discouraging, for the reason that, during the whole of this period, there was a steady growth of good intentions in Great Britain. For the past hundred years each succeeding generation of Englishmen, Scotsmen and Welshmen has listened more patiently than its predecessor to Irishmen setting forth their tale of grievances in Parliament, upon the platform, and in the Press. Each succeeding generation has striven harder than its predecessor to do its duty by Ireland, and to make reparation for the misfeasances of its grandsires down to the twentieth remove. Yet all we have to show for it is a dwindling population, an imperfect development, a perpetual discontent.

If Great Britain had not been trying so hard to do its duty the results might appear less discouraging. If, like our grandsires down to the twentieth remove—from the landing of Henry the Second in the twelfth century, to the Act of Union at the beginning of the nineteenth—if, like them, we had frankly disregarded our duty to Ireland, we might now perhaps console ourselves with the hope of remedying present evils by reforming our own characters and mending our ways. But we reformed our own characters and mended our ways long ago ; and yet the evils refuse to be remedied.

Putting matters at their very lowest, and looking at England, Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India merely as so many branches of the same business, what would the verdict be on net results? Would any clear-headed accountant, when he came to contrast the dwindling of the one with the prosperity of all the others, hesitate for a single moment to say that there must be something very wrong with the management of Ireland? He might not be able at the first glance to determine whether the bad results were due to want of foresight, vacillation, neglect, corruption or stupidity; but without the least doubt he would lay the blame, not upon the rank and file of the staff, but upon the managers and their methods of organisation. It would be absurd, of course, to attempt any strict comparison between a country and a shop. None the less, Gladstone's famous statement that you cannot excuse failure of government by the doctrine of a double dose of original sin in the governed, is one of the least disputable propositions ever laid down by any statesman.

Throughout the ages adventurous spirits have sought fortune under strange skies. The unknown has attractions for them, not terrors. But even in America, the restless are always in a small minority. The bulk of a population will never be reduced by emigration if people are moderately happy and contented at home. To keep them so is the constant preoccupation of every sane Government; and for two generations certainly—probably for four—our own Imperial Government has been engaged,

as regards Ireland, in an unending series of costly but fruitless efforts to this end. In spite of it all, emigration still continues ; numbers dwindle at each succeeding census ; the people are neither happy nor contented. In a petulant mood we may be inclined to lay the blame upon the people ; for if the present system were really a bad one, how could England, Scotland and Wales continue to increase and prosper under it ? But the system which satisfies one community may only serve to irritate another.

2. Difficulty of getting the Parties to come to an Agreement among themselves.

It is very difficult for any one—even for Irishmen, if one may judge from recent debates—to be absolutely certain as to the proper remedy. The wound has been bungled at so long that there are now all sorts of adhesions—adhesions of interest, prejudice, sentiment, suspicion and personal antipathy—which must somehow be broken or “massaged” away, before we can hope to recover the full use of our judgment. Each party, each section, knows its own case far too well. It can rattle you off its own particular tale of grievance, injustice and distrust—what has happened amiss under the existing system ; what disaster would occur under any alternative system which the wit of man might devise. There is nothing so fatal to the hope of agreement as too much brooding upon one’s own wrongs and other men’s wickednesses. There has been of late far too

much brooding, both in Great Britain and Ireland, both in the North and the South, both among Protestants and Roman Catholics. And as a result political sanity has become seriously impaired.

This Home Rule controversy is at least half a century old. It has been in a very acute stage during the past six years—so acute, that for months before the German attack gave a new direction to our thoughts, we were hovering on the brink of civil war. In regard to this particular issue the sympathies of the various inhabitants of the United Kingdom are warped. They are weary of argument and contention. All sides—for there are more than two—are angry and impatient. To most Englishmen, Scotsmen and Welshmen the urging of this controversial matter in our present situation seems almost an indecency. To most Irishmen, on the other hand, the failure to put the Home Rule Act into force at once is regarded with black suspicion, as a plot to swindle Ireland out of a boon which she had actually won.

If political leaders dared, they would admit what the ordinary man freely admits—that they have grown stale. Neither their judgment nor their temper can be relied on. Considering the anxieties of the war, this is no wonder. Nor is it much of a reproach to them, quite apart from the war, seeing what an ancient bone of contention they are worrying over. In our calmer moments we are all more or less conscious of our inability to see the wood for the trees. Is it possible that a fresh mind might be able to view things in their true proportions? If we saw any

chance of that, there are few of us who would not welcome an experiment.

3. *What an Imperial Conference after the War might do*

During the *pourparlers* which followed the Dublin rising in April last, one of the terms agreed upon was, that the final settlement of the Irish Question should be referred to an Imperial Conference to be held after the war. Though in the end these negotiations led to little except mutual recrimination, this particular proposal met with pretty general approval. Cynics indeed alleged that any plan for postponing a disagreeable decision, and for shifting the responsibility for it on to other shoulders is apt to be popular. But people who are not cynics saw in the suggestion evidence of a chastened mood, of humility, and of faith that a friendly and sympathetic tribunal, the majority of whose members would be uncommitted beforehand to any particular solution, would have a better chance of arriving at a workable arrangement than any possible convention of pledged partisans.

The objection that Home Rule is a domestic matter which affects the United Kingdom alone, and that one of the fundamental principles of our Empire obliges each separate kingdom or dominion to keep its hands off the internal affairs of all the others, was met by the answer that the Irish Question is an Imperial as well as a Local one. The justice of this reply cannot be disputed. The state of Ireland has been from the beginning, and is now, more than ever,

one of the gravest dangers which threatens the unity of the Empire.

Though the general principle of non-interference in one another's affairs is sound, occasions are bound to arise when both the individual State and the Empire—both the part and the whole—will have interests in the same sphere. Such overlapping may be of rare occurrence, but it cannot be altogether avoided. And if we are prepared to accept loyally the conditions of a united Empire, we must allow that the vital needs of the Empire are paramount over all others.

It may be unlikely, but it is quite within the bounds of possibility, that the unity of Canada might be threatened (say) by acute differences between Quebec and the other States of the Dominion. It is conceivable, though improbable, that the peace of Australia or South Africa might be in danger owing to some social or racial schism. It is not merely possible, or likely, but almost a certainty, that the status as well as the administrative system of our Eastern Empire will shortly call for revision. The unity of Canada, the peace of Australia and South Africa, the contented development of India along the lines of the noblest Indian ideals, are all matters of Imperial as well as Local concern. Were any of these problems to reach a point at which Local feelings and traditions had hardened into inveterate prejudice—so that civil war and simmering rebellion presented themselves as the only alternatives—then in such event, the guidance of some friendly tribunal, representative of the

whole Empire, would seem to offer us a natural solution. And if in these cases, why not in that of Ireland? At a time when there is so much talk of the advantages of a "League of Nations" to enforce peace and justice throughout the world, it would seem somewhat absurd if, within the confines of a single Empire, we cannot succeed in setting up a "League of States" to get rid of the dangers of national discontent, rebellion and civil war.

4. *What the present Imperial Conference cannot do.*

For these reasons the idea of summoning an Imperial Conference after the war to seek a final solution of the Irish Question appears to be a sound one.

This, however, is a very different thing from rushing precipitately upon the special War Conference of the Empire and asking it to undertake a task which lies entirely outside its province. The present meeting of Dominion Ministers cannot possibly hope to find time for considering and coming to a decision upon so complex a problem as the *final* settlement of the Irish Question. Its thoughts and energies are already mortgaged nearly up to the hilt. And nothing could be more injurious to the permanent credit and prestige of that Imperial tribunal which we seek to call into existence than to force it, as its first task, to deliver a hasty and ill-considered judgment upon a question which excites so many bitter feelings. For, as no plan which the present

Conference could be expected to propound could possibly be the result of thorough inquiry and careful deliberation, so it would satisfy no one. It would be far more liable to exacerbate grievances than to redress them.

When the holders of divergent views are allowed a full and fair hearing—when they are satisfied that the authority before whom they lay their case is anxious only to do justice, and has accordingly taken pains to master the facts—though they will no doubt suffer keen disappointment if the decision falls short of their hopes—still more so if it is adverse to them—their disappointment, nevertheless, can be borne, because it will have no origin in malice or vindictiveness.

The converse also holds good. A tribunal—be it a commission or a conference—which is unfamiliar with the facts, and is not given time to learn them, or to hear them fully stated before it by men of differing opinions, will lack authority; and whichever way it may decide it will only harden opposition. The recent resolution of the Australian Senate is an instance in point. We may assume that it was actuated by the best of motives; but it was a judgment pronounced by people who had not heard the parties to the suit. So far as this intervention has done anything, it has only done mischief. If we desire to invoke the aid of a supreme court of arbitration which shall be representative of the common sense and patriotism of the whole Empire, we must see that it has fair play. We must safeguard it against all forms of pressure, but, above all,

against the pressure of impatience, which would force it to decide before it has had time to consider.

Can we then hope for no help from the War Conference of the Empire in setting right the present deplorable state of Ireland? To accept this conclusion would be to fly to the opposite extreme. Mr. Asquith's suggestion is worthy of respectful consideration; for he, of all men, is the most unlikely to hope for good results from any Commission which should seek to settle the Irish Question without giving a patient hearing to all sides.

5. Questions which might be submitted to the present Imperial Conference.

No originality is claimed for the following suggestions. They have all been put forward on different occasions during the past year by people whose opinions on the Irish Question possess much greater value than my own. . . . There are possibly several questions which the War Conference might be asked to answer without encroaching too much upon its time, and without travelling beyond its province. For, after all, its province is the vigorous conduct of the war; and nothing at the present time hampers the British effort more than the fact that Ireland, though it has acknowledged the righteousness of this war, has not as yet borne its fair share of the burden.

(1) *Is the Irish Question an Imperial Question?*

(2) *Is the final settlement of the Irish Question a fit subject for the consideration of an Imperial*

Conference to be summoned immediately after the war?

If these two questions are answered in the negative we shall be no worse off than we are at present. If they are answered in the affirmative it may not carry us so far as many people would like; but it will at least do away with the mischievous idea, so prevalent in Ireland at the present time, that when the war ends a Tory Government may be installed, and the Home Rule Act may become waste paper. No Tory Government would dare to go back, or would wish to go back, upon the decision of the present Imperial Conference.

(3) *By way of preparing the ground for the Imperial Conference which will meet immediately after the war, would it be desirable to set up at once an independent Commission to consider a single problem, viz., the extent to which it would be necessary to amend the existing Home Rule Act in order to fit it into a Federal system?*

(4) *Can some temporary arrangement be made for the government of Ireland for the duration of the war—some arrangement which will accord better than the present one with the spirit of the Irish people?*

The problem which suddenly faced Ireland in April last was the same which faced France in the early days of the Revolution, when Mirabeau called in vain for the restoration of executive authority. The beginning of the settlement in the latter case was the famous "whiff of grape-shot" in the streets of Paris. This had to be in Paris, as afterwards in

Dublin, for the reason that *fainéant* no-government—the cruellest of all empirics—had left no alternative. But force alone is no remedy. For the complete restoration of executive authority it is necessary to restore, not only law and order, but the loyalty of the people to the Executive. And that is precisely what is lacking in Ireland at the present time.

The crying need of Ireland at the moment is not legislative machinery—for until the war is over there will be little time for legislation—so much as government—government which will touch the sympathies and command the confidence of the Irish people. The crux of the problem just now is, not an Irish Parliament, but an Irish Executive; the former may well wait until happier times. Is it impossible to constitute some form of authority which can carry on until peace is declared, or until the Imperial Conference after the war has offered its solution?—some authority which is capable of drawing out the full loyalty and enthusiasm of the Irish people; which will rid us of an ever-present nightmare of anxiety and suspicion; which will refill, and more than refill, the devoted ranks of the Irish regiments; which will put beyond a doubt that, in the war of freedom, not only the Irish army, but the Irish people has borne its part?

No man certainly will deny the difficulty of setting up an Irish Executive of this kind. But is such a thing impossible? The events of last summer do not destroy hope; on the contrary, they encourage it. Those negotiations, it is true, ended in failure; but the failure was not due so much to want of good

feeling on both sides—or even to mismanagement, misunderstanding, haggling and delay—as to the fact that the plan then under discussion was an impracticable one, for the reason that it aimed half-heartedly at a compromise with regard to the future, when it should have aimed whole-heartedly at meeting an immediate emergency. The method which was then proposed, accepted, modified and finally rejected, was not less repugnant to parliamentary traditions than it was to the exigencies of a state of war.

What seems to be most needed at the present time is a few men to govern Ireland who, if they will consent to act together, may hope to possess the confidence of Ireland. Nor does it matter much whether they agree or disagree on general politics, if only they will support one another loyally for the special purpose in hand. I mention names as they occur to me—that is, at random, and not as a carefully considered selection. If an Executive consisting of Mr. Redmond, Mr. Devlin, Colonel Craig, and possibly one or two others, would undertake to govern Ireland until war is over, why should they not be given a free hand and set to do it? And if it had previously been decided to submit the final settlement of the Irish Question to an Imperial Conference to be held immediately after the war, their task would be made far easier. For in that case the members of this Executive would be independent of ulterior considerations, and would be relieved to a very large extent from the temptation of manœuvring for a position of future vantage.

“But,” it will be said at once, “such men as these

will never consent to act together." I shall not believe this until the War Conference, as a part of *its* war duty, has endeavoured to persuade them, as a part of *their* war duty, to undertake this task, and has failed.

* * * * *

A United Empire, a United Kingdom and a United Ireland are not incompatible aims. Indeed, it may well be doubted if any one of these three is capable of being fully realised apart from the other two. But if, by some strange accident, or supreme effort of statesmanship, such a thing was in fact accomplished, the solitary achievement would offer no prospect of permanency. For it would lack its natural supports both internal and external. It would possess no security, but only an artificial and precarious stability, which could hardly hope to maintain its balance for so much as a generation.

No one of these three aims—a United Empire, a United Kingdom and a United Ireland—has ever yet been realised at any period of British history; and we are only deceiving ourselves with words when we pretend the contrary.



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